

Can We Have a Cultural Policy?

Plenary Speech by Ellen McCulloch-Lovell

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Thank you for that wonderful introduction. I am happy to be among so many friends. I've learned many lessons from Wayne Lawson and from Margaret Wyszomirski over the years. After some minor intrigue in an arts service organization in which we served together, Wayne said with characteristic warmth and candor "Always deal directly." And if I could apply a phrase to Margaret it would be: "Always think honestly." She has never been afraid to think of all the options -- in a reasoned way. Both are witnesses to the power of ideas. Both have changed a profession and built a field.

What is this field? Four decades ago it would have been clusters of cultural institutions in large cities, separated from largely undocumented traditional cultures in communities, and often separated from artists practicing wherever they found place and patrons.

Several years ago it might have been described as "the public arts field" -- that complex interplay of arts institutions, presenters, audiences and funding stimulated by the introduction of federal, state, and local public support for the arts in the mid-sixties.

Rapidly, those who have studied how cultural life in the United States operates have altered the description. In fact, how cultural life is studied actually develops the field.

What picture is emerging now? I ask this question for two reasons: because we need to know "about what" we are developing policies; and because we are in one of the most fascinating, fertile times in which we can ask: can America have a cultural policy?

Let me first alter the question: has America had a cultural policy? Perhaps not in the sense that European countries have had, not a clear political expression of policy, not a Labor policy or a Conservative policy. And most people in the arts would say that we do not and perhaps should not; we are too diverse and pluralistic a people; our funding is too complex and unorganized; our government funding too small a share, to have a cultural policy.

But clearly, in the early sixties, the committees and foundation grants practices began to build towards a more formal and articulated federal entry into cultural support. So we must revisit August Heckscher's famous 1963 report to President Kennedy. Many recall that Heckscher, whom the world has recently lost, proposed a national foundation for the arts. But many do not remember that he also articulated government's historic role in encouraging creativity and cultural awareness. As the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities pointed out in its report to President Clinton, Creative America, from the earliest days, government has been a builder, a designer, a printer and a publisher. "The government commissions monuments and

operates archives and museums. It conserves land and other natural resources that are fundamental to the cultural practices of many Americans. Government offers incentives for improving schools and enacts legislation that affects the health of foundations and non-profit organizations. Government policies influence broadcasting, historic preservation, and the availability of electronic communications." In other words, the government has policies that, even if not put forth as cultural policy, shape culture in profound ways.

Probably one of the most fundamental of these policies is the limited term of economic protection for creators, granted in Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution which stimulated American innovation. Another is the tax code, especially deductibility for charitable contributions, which provided private donors more incentive to give. The practice of government to employ the arts and the humanities in writing historical documents, commemorating events, decorating buildings, conducting ceremonies, even entertaining dignitaries, is also an inherent policy.

I must add here that it is not only in the context of governments that we can discuss cultural policy. The practices and priorities of foundations, corporations, philanthropists and cultural organizations themselves are policies. If, as parents, you give your child ten dollars to buy a book rather than for the movies, then I guess you have a family cultural policy.

In 1965, the nation articulated cultural policy in a powerful way, passing legislation to create a National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities. Public Law 89-209 stated -- and it's worth hearing those words again:

"...While no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence, it is necessary and appropriate for the federal government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of their creative talent."

The principles of this legislation were:

- to improve citizens' access to cultural experiences;
- to encourage individual achievement;
- to build state and local support; and
- to match public grants with private funds.

And by many measures, the NEA and NEH have realized these objectives remarkably.

These principles changed over the years, and to describe them as some good arts administrators and scholars here have, one would look at changes in authorizing legislation programming and guidelines, and especially at appropriations. If we have a cultural policy in America it is a policy by budget. Follow the money -- as the FBI said -- and you will find what the values are and where the political compromises are. For example, it was probably political expediency that guaranteed a percentage of each Endowments' funding to the states, rather than the far-sighted creation of a multi-layered arts support system -- but that is what resulted.

Now I am not going to trace all the developments -- the growth of the state arts agencies, the stimulation of local arts councils, organizing touring, preserving traditional culture, placing artists in the schools. But I would observe that over the years, cultural policy -- whether overt or covert -- has more and more emphasized the utilitarian -- the social uses of the arts -- whether

through cultural tourism, urban design, or arts education --not in and of itself -- but justified as an instrument for cognitive skills or for self esteem.

This does not mean we should not study, and promote these positive results -- it does mean that in the struggle for funding, arts advocates have gotten terribly good at proving such admitted benefits as economic stimulus, greater academic achievement, improving racial harmony and enhancing institutional understanding.

Do we have a cultural policy?

In many ways we do, although we wouldn't say so. In an affirmation of the public commitment to cultural preservation and development, we still have federal cultural agencies and institutions, such as the Smithsonian Institution -- because the President, and a majority in Congress and of the populace believe government should support the arts and scholarship. Sadly Congress agreed to a policy not to direct funds to individual artists.

Beginning in 1993, the Clinton Administration has confirmed, expanded, and articulated policies in some ways worth examining. Within a first term policy of deficit reduction, we fought for cultural funding. Last year during the most severe threat to the NEA the Administration issued no less than five "SAP"s, Statements of Administration Policy, threatening to veto the Interior Appropriations bill if it did not contain funding for the arts and the humanities.

In 1994, the President chose to reactivate the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, this emphasizing the public-private partnerships and the need for research and public discussion. The First Lady has been an active Honorary Chair of the Committee, personally presenting two of its reports. The President asked the Committee to study how cultural life in America is supported -- or not -- and to make recommendations to him -- resulting in the 1997 report, Creative America, and the earlier landmark study of our complex funding system, Looking Ahead. These studies were accomplished with the support of a number of private foundations, notably the Rockefeller Foundation, Texaco, Howard Gilman, Andrew W. Mellon, and J. Paul Getty Trust -- and with information gathered from many scholars and national service organizations -- so I take this occasion to thank you all.

The government continued its role as a designer, builder, printer, researcher, and multi-sourced funder. Just a few examples: the General Services Administration takes care of its WPA art collection, renovates federal building and commissions art -- one new landmark is the new Ronald Reagan building on Pennsylvania Avenue, designed by James Ingo Freed. The Department of Transportation has put millions into approaches and signage and beautification which have enhanced cultural sites and boosted tourism.

The Department of Education developed the Goals 2000 legislation, embracing national standards for the arts and for humanities disciplines. The NEA and Education jointly fund the National Arts Partnership. The Department of Justice programs focus on reaching at-risk youth, including through the arts.

The Clinton Administration has enacted ideas -- which while not consciously cultural policies -- contribute to a policy framework in ways we will see for years to come.

Last year the FCC required the networks to increase the hours of children's programming. One of our year 2000 goals is to wire all the schools and libraries to the internet -- both increasing access to information and challenging cultural agencies and organizations to provide better content. There is \$26 million in the fiscal year 1999 budget to put historical and cultural material on-line.

The creation of the White House Millennium Council -- to "honor the past and imagine the future" -- is itself a recognition of the value of creativity, innovation and discovery to American society. How else to mark a milestone in human history? Millennium Evenings at the White House -- now broadcast, down-linked to hundreds of satellite sites and cybercast -- invite creators and visionaries to help us to reflect -- to learn from the arts, humanities and sciences -- as we prepare to end a century and begin a new millennium.

Our national millennium program, Save America's Treasures, is a clear statement of policy. It says that as we move from one era to the next, we must take what we value of our history and culture with us. We must preserve the art, artifacts, documents, monuments, and historic structures and sites that tell our American stories and preserve our nation's memories. We cannot enter into an age of amnesia. We will not allow the ancient structures of Mesa Verde to crumble, or the monuments at Gettysburg Battlefield to topple, or the Thomas Edison's lab notes and letters to turn to dust. We do not want to lose George Washington's campaign tent, or an Underground Railroad site, the Louis Armstrong tapes, or Thomas Hart Benton's murals.

We are asking Congress for \$100 million over two years to help Save America's Treasures. This is the first major cultural initiative since the founding of the Institute of Museum Services in 1976. And in our unique American way, we are encouraging partnerships with the private sector through the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which is forming a new Millennium Committee to Save America's Treasures.

This effort should be both government-wide and grass roots -- for every community across America has its treasures -- whether they are pioneer letters in the library or the war monuments in the park. And it must be non-partisan.

As the First Lady said recently at a White House briefing for the Save America's Treasures committee: "We will all be proud when we view a repaired Star Spangled Banner...or know we have preserved the Declaration of Independence or Constitution and the Bill of Rights at the National Archives."

And I want to recognize one of the major private partners in Save America's Treasures, especially because Marian Godfrey is here -- the Pew Charitable Trusts -- which in February announced nearly \$6 million in grants for the restoration of the flag and the Charters of Freedom. And last week at the White House, Rebecca Rimel described Pew's extraordinary \$25 million commitment this year to preservation and to putting treasures on-line.

Save America's Treasures is not only urgent and necessary to carry forward our American experiences, it is also a way, by having the past, of imagining the future -- of seeing how important the works and lives of artists, scholars, discoverers and historical figures are to our country's flourishing.

So now it is time to ask the next question:

Should we have a cultural policy?

No, not a monolithic one, not if after every election funding is redirected, design and architecture are altered and organizations cannot know what forms of support are available. Yes, if it means this growing awareness of how many decisions stimulate or depress cultural development, if it means more commitment to knowing what works -- especially after the 33-year experiment in public-private partnerships. Yes, if it means understanding and acting on the power of arts education to develop the whole, creative, reflective, communicative, human person. Yes, if it means employing the arts to have strong, aesthetic communities. Yes, if it means providing alternatives to the crass, the homogenized, the assaulting, in popular culture. And surely yes if it results in stable far-sighted funding for cultural organizations and artists.

Now to the last question:

Can we have a cultural policy?

We are here today at the best possible time to answer that question. We are seeing the creation of an exciting new field, which is expanding every day. Over the last several years -- spurred in part by instability in the arts and in the complex cultural support system -- we see an ever-concentrating attention on research, publications, and policy debate. Within two years, Creative America , the NEA's American Canvas , and the findings of the American Assembly so ably co-chaired by Alberta Arthurs and Frank Hodson, all came out. Groups of foundations, scholars and government officials met to discuss the creation of a policy community.

The new Center for Arts and Culture was born and given leadership by Gigi Bradford and its board, chaired by James Allen Smith.

This field is exhuming its past research and commissioning new work. It is describing a comprehensive "cultural sector" which includes arts, humanities, libraries, historical preservation, public broadcasting, museums, higher education and segments of the entertainment industry. Together, thinking and acting as a sector, it can vastly increase its collective clout.

The policy field is describing an intricate pattern of culture in the U.S. -- where the amateur arts and traditional practices, non-profit professional and commercial parts all interact with and influence each other constantly. We are arriving at a much more nuanced and realistic view of how our cultural life operates -- one that cannot be artificially fragmented by policy and funding.

We especially can have a cultural policy if we recognize how policy gets made and have an intelligent apparatus in place to feed it.

Policy gets made by budget, by vote, by speeches, at press conferences and in media reports, and through the power of ideas. It gets shaped at conferences like this one.

Now we are meeting today at a university -- which should be an incubator for ideas and a safe, tolerant place for artists and scholars and students and arts administrators to try them out. Policy does belong in -- and can get spawned in -- the academy. But sometimes when we say something is "academic" what we mean is: "it doesn't really matter." So I want to summon one of our great poets to remind us that all this abstract talk about policy is terribly consequential. William Carlos Williams told us it matters in a poem many of you quote--but may not know the line comes from that lovely, expansive work, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower."

Apologies to Dr. Williams spirit for excerpting his beautiful and long poem:

"I have learned much in my life

from books

and out of them

about love.

Death

is not the end of it."

" The poem

is complex and the place made

in our lives

for the poem.

Silence can be complex too,

but you do not get far

with silence."

"My heart rouses
thinking to bring you the news
of something
that concerns you
and concerns many men. Look at
what passes for the new.
You will not find it there but in
despised poems.
It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there."

We must tell the news in the poem. We will not get far with silence.

Ellen McCulloch-Lovell is the Deputy Assistant to the President, and Advisor to the First Lady on the Millenium. She most recently served as Executive Director of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. From 1983-1994, McCulloch-Lovell served as Chief of Staff to US Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT). While on Capitol Hill, she chaired the Board of the Vermont Governor's Institutes on the Arts, which she founded in 1983.

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